



**“WAYS AND MEANS”**  
**SCRIPTURE: PSALM 31: 1-5, 15-16; JOHN 14: 1-14**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**May 14, 2017**  
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

**Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16**

31:1 In you, O LORD, I seek refuge; do not let me ever be put to shame; in your righteousness deliver me.

31:2 Incline your ear to me; rescue me speedily. Be a rock of refuge for me, a strong fortress to save me.

31:3 You are indeed my rock and my fortress; for your name's sake lead me and guide me,

31:4 take me out of the net that is hidden for me, for you are my refuge.

31:5 Into your hand I commit my spirit; you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.

31:15 My times are in your hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors.

31:16 Let your face shine upon your servant; save me in your steadfast love.

**John 14:1-14**

14:1 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me.

14:2 In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

14:3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.

14:4 And you know the way to the place where I am going."

14:5 Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"

14:6 Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

14:7 If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

14:8 Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied."

14:9 Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

14:10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works.

14:11 Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.

14:12 Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.

14:13 I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.

14:14 If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

The Word of the Lord.  
**Thanks be to God.**

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Maybe you have seen the 17-year cicadas emerge like we have been out at our farm these last several days.

Their group emergence is so exactly coordinated that often they emerge in one night—1000s of them ready to search for a mate and some vegetation to eat. And, to sing their song, a primal shrill bottomed with the hum of creatures who sound relieved and so utterly determined. It is the song of emergence, of transformation.

I've been watching them when I can—in the light of day, in the moonlight. I've seen them pour out of their husk and just begin to move around and let their wings adjust to the air. I've seen them change color—from an almost ghostly white to the dark black body and vivid red eyes that define them. I've seen some successfully enter into their new phase of life—and felt grateful.

And then I've seen others where something didn't go the way it should—only half way emerged and the process arrested. 17 years of growing from the size of an ant to their adult size stopped right as they emerge. I have to admit, I grieved for those—after all that time, and then the process just stopped. It felt cruel.

I also spent some time yesterday trying to make one of my blue heelers stop eating the fully emerged ones. They must be a tasty snack because he really didn't want to stop—but I felt protective of these creatures. "Do you know what they've been through to get this far?" I heard myself say to my dog, Huckleberry.

The 17-year cicadas are singing to us about life finding its fullness in process. The song sounds strange to our ears, our ears trained to enjoy the melodies of productivity, of impatience, of force and control.

They are singing the song of beings deeply embedded in the ways and means of how God made this world.

It's a song we need to hear—we are so very estranged from the truth of how we are made.

What if we listen to their primordial hum, the song of beings not anxious, but determined?

They are resurrection teachers and theirs is a resurrection song: Resurrection, that mysterious capacity of sentience to defy death, to gestate life, to emerge into a new way of being and doing.

Resurrection is the power to abide in eternity—the mystery of the all in all and the forevermore. We are so anxious about ourselves, our agendas, our conflicts, our loneliness, our pain that we can miss the ways God enables the universe to sing to us about who we really are.

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Those 17-year cicadas were beginning their journey as larvae 17 years ago—almost exactly to the day of Sidney's due date. He was born two weeks earlier. A day when a part of me that had been afraid and even buried came alive in ways I had thought impossible.

Pregnancy had already taught me hard lessons. First a miscarriage and months of worrying that something must be wrong with me. The doctor even said to me "women who had been sexually assaulted often struggle with infertility. You might as well forget trying to get pregnant the old fashioned way."

Then a pregnancy that brought my whole life to a screeching halt—I couldn't work, I couldn't be around food, I couldn't get up and move, I couldn't read or even watch TV for much more than a few minutes. It was all I could do to gestate that little life.

And then 63 hours of labor to get him here.

What a journey it has been to realize that motherhood is not really about biology or gender or social constructions of what ideal mothers are supposed to be like.

Motherhood is a mode of being alive, a style of existence—that invites all of us, no matter our family make up, into a way of life that is defined not by control, but by bold vulnerability.

The whole topic of motherhood and mother's day for that matter is fraught—fraught with memories, disappointments, hopes, and fears that are unique to each of us.

Mother's day can be a painful day if it is simply about whether you have children or not or whether your mother loved you well or left you with painful wounds, or maybe some of both. Can we let this Mother's Day speak to us instead about the ambiguity and idiosyncrasy of human life?

In a world that struggles to make and keep life so much of the time, we need mother's day to speak to us about ways and means we all have to be present and able to respond in this world, and not about the people we either do or don't have in our lives.

Motherhood is a way of being in the world, a style of existence that learns how to trust life when things do not necessarily fit. This style of being in the world reminds us of our deep connection with everything that is. This deep connection is not a neat and tidy set of relationships, but more like a black widow's snarled up chaotic web. The connections are dense and impossible to untangle.

Motherhood exists in spaces in which the system is not systematic, and the location is not static. Motherhood has a dizzying immediacy to life's change and power. It realizes the life-giving realities of ambiguity, of idiosyncrasy, of interdependence. It is like vapor and concrete.

What seems like throw-away time is actually a moment of truth. What feels like straining to see greater purpose in inconsequential things gives way to a whole new way of being in the world.

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All of us have the capacity to embody this boldly vulnerable mode of existence—and the world could stand to be mothered by us all right now—loved with the power and ability to respond and adapt and make life from where we are.

That's what we come from, that was the nature of the first home that formed us all. After all, we all come from the same first mother—a placenta.

Like that 17-year cicada, the placenta does most of its work in the darkness of the underneath—it is the organ that gave each and everyone of us a way to come into

our own. And like that 17-year cicada, the placenta can tell us a thing or two about abiding.

The placenta is an ingenious organ.

The placenta selectively takes from the mother's blood what is needed for fetal development. It can even deconstruct and reconstruct to get the emerging life what it needs. The placenta is not a passive sieve.

Proteins are disassembled, carried over, and reassembled.

Bacteria are diverted to special immune agents. Enzymes deactivate unnecessary adrenal hormones.

The placenta is immediate to mother and fetus at the same time: able to respond, able to provide.

The placenta creates and enables independence and interdependence.

The placenta's greatest strength is also its greatest weakness. In the case of some toxins, like mercury, nicotine, and nickel (in car exhaust) the placenta is compromised or overridden and the fetus can be irreparably harmed.

The strength and the fragility of the placenta are both functions of the immediacy of its interdependence with everything that is.

That's what we come from and that is who we are.

This reality formed and fed us. This reality invites us now to tell the truth about ourselves.

We are tangled up with a complicated world—and we have the ways and the means to both thrive in the midst of it and be diminished and even destroyed by it.

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John's Gospel is all about immediacy—or in the language of John, abiding.

Don't be troubled—God abides in you and you in God—and Jesus is the way, the truth, the life-blood of this promise. It is Jesus who shows us who we are—we abide with God—always, everywhere.

The more we believe in this abiding, this dwelling with God, the less troubled we are, the more we can move through life as God intended—not grasping but trusting, not destroying but connecting, not depriving but thriving.

The Psalmist knew this dwelling place—solid and ethereal, generative and redemptive.

“Into your hand I commit my spirit.”

These are words for the living of our days and for the peaceful passage of our deaths—whether they be our physical death, or all the moments of dying, shedding, changing, transforming that which a well-lived life entails.

Grace Covenant, our future is in God’s hands. And everywhere we turn Jesus is reminding us to trust the way God is moving in our midst.

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Cultivating a culture of sanctuary can sound like an ambiguous, amorphous goal. A few of you tell me you prefer a simpler solution to the invitation to be sanctuary than engaging in a long, drawn out process of self-discovery and transformation. Some would rather us just say no or yes to the question and then move on. Or maybe some feel like things are just fine the way they are.

This desire for clarity and for a clear direction is understandable—after all, these are confusing times and it would be a relief for something to be clear.

And it would especially be comforting if we get some kind of confirmation that we are good people—the ones with the ways and the means to fix things and to help others and to feel good about ourselves in the process.

Jesus, our way to truth, our way to life, however has cleared a very different path for his followers. Far from a clean up or down answer to a single question, Jesus invites us into a way of life that is able to respond to all kinds of suffering (including our own) with bold vulnerability.

Sanctuary, like motherhood, is a boldly vulnerable way of being in the world. Sanctuary is a mode of being that doesn’t try to deny our deep and tangled up interdependence. It is a mode of being that realizes the ability to respond is more about relationships than it is about resources.

What seems like throw-away time is ultimately a moment of truth. What feels like straining to see greater purpose in inconsequential things gives way to a whole new way of being in the world.

Friends, from the 17-year cicada to the genius of the placenta, God fills our world with messages of heroic ways of making and keeping life. And these ways are not about dominance or control, they are not about quick solutions or one size fits all strategies. They sing to us about our deep connection; they sing the *primordial hum of beings not anxious, but determined*.

We are fragile and fertile beings in a tangled up world. Open your mind, your spiritual imagination up to the wonder of Resurrection in an interdependent world—envision a world in which ambiguity and process are not things to avoid or dismiss, but pathways to truth, to new life.

Underneath in the deepest and darkest caverns of who we are gestates a will to be transformed—with a God-given genius for connecting and providing, for dwelling and abiding.

Do not let your hearts be troubled, let them be who they were made to be—bold and vulnerable, connected and determined, and willing to commit our spirits into God’s hand, willing and even ready to let our voices merge into the harmonies of God’s Resurrection song.

Thanks be to God.